

CHAPTER 1

We were in darkness. It was our home. The vertical, cylindrical hollow was about two feet in diameter—tight for three adults, just large enough for us to breathe up against each other or to shuffle slowly in a bumping, awkward revolution.

The curved inside surface of the wall had a nubbled texture against my fingertips like painted concrete. The slick feeling reminded me of a water-resistant finish, perhaps a high-gloss bathroom sealant or a hard resin. I couldn't scratch it. I couldn't see the floor in the dark, and I didn't have the maneuvering space to bend down and touch it with my hands, but I prodded it with my toes and decided that it was probably a grid of metal bars welded together. The grid spaces were not quite large enough for a toe to get stuck.

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The flat ceiling, a few inches above my head, was made of the same nubbly solid material as the walls. It was punctured with perfectly round holes like bullet holes, each about the width of a finger. I stuck my index finger up into a hole as far as I could, but all I felt was a narrow shaft. Air and fluid bubbled continuously out of the holes and made a mumbling garble of sound that filled up the space around us. Without the air trickling in we would have asphyxiated. Without the liquid dribbling on our hair and running down the sides of the tube, we would have dehydrated.

At first I thought the liquid was blood. *They*, whoever *they* were who had put us in here, had a refined enough sense of malice to feed us blood. It was warm but not hot, viscous but not oily, and I imagined that it had a salty and sweet smell, although I had trouble distinguishing the odor of one thing from another in that cramped space. Maybe the salt smell came out of our own naked and perspiring bodies.

Thankfully, the fluid turned out not to

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be so horribly arterial. When I put aside my dread, I was able to identify the stuff. It was, of all bizarre things, pear nectar, and had the slightly grainy texture of pureed pear. It was ambrosia, of a sort. It was food and drink and dermal moisturizer in one. As soon as I realized the identity of the liquid, the smell of pear became overwhelming. In time I adapted and couldn't smell it anymore.

Arguably we should have been grateful for the nectar, but it didn't succeed in mollifying us. We stamped, we shouted, we pounded on the walls. Of course we did. We felt sick with panic. We shook with rage. We sobbed. But none of it helped. If I hit the wall, slamming it with the soft part of my palm, lunging at it with my shoulder, I accomplished nothing more than a wet slapping sound, a dull ache, and a bruise that I could feel afterward for a while. None of us could hear any indication of a hollow space behind the wall. Its solidity was so absolute that I lost the ability to imagine emptiness outside our microcosm. In my mind the

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universe was filled up infinitely with concrete, and at its center was one tiny bubble in which our randomly assorted souls had been entombed.

I wanted to jump up and land hard on the metal floor, to dent it with my heels if I could—but my head cracked into the ceiling, and when I landed, the floor was so slippery with pear nectar that my feet went out from under me. I flailed, bashing against concrete and flesh, and my two prison-mates shoved me back onto my feet again. None too gently. Our tempers were brittle.

Rose was the only one of us who could manage to sit down. She had a more delicate build and could fold herself into the slippery space between our bodies. She felt over the metal grid of the floor and reported that there were no bolts, no screws, nothing that could be unfastened. Everything was welded solidly. We asked her to grasp the lattice and give it a hard shake, but she said no, she couldn't, the spaces between the bars were too narrow for her fingers. She

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bent down her head until I felt her cheek bumping my foot, and then she hollered, her voice resonating down through the pipes, but we never heard any sound back.

Why? Why are we here? she muttered as we helped her to stand up again. Surely the most fundamental of questions. **Why are we here? What should we do? It is what it is.**

Our voices were so resonant in our sarcophagus, whispering and vibrating around and through my head, that all our sentences felt to me as though they came from my own mouth. I had trouble distinguishing. I would think, Did I say that? Did I just mutter something out loud, something unpremeditated that came out in a falsetto? Why would I do that? Am I insane already? No no, it's just Rose. She spoke, not me.

I thought of her as Rose because that was the color of her voice. In absolute darkness, lacking any stray photon of actual color, my brain was beginning to invent it. The sound of *his* voice was hemlock green, and I thought of him as Hemlock or Henry or Mr. Henry Greene. The sound of my own

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voice was blue. Brother Brian Blue, with a monkish connotation in my mind. She had a **warmth** and clarity to her voice, he had an **acerbic** edge, and I had a reflective **depth**. Our shades changed depending on the mood, from pale, pastel, delicate, thoughtful, to the fiery brightness of emotional revelation, to the nearly black hue of teeth-gritting rage. We all three traveled across a vast space of emotion. We couldn't help it. We were so squeezed side-to-side that our souls squirted out promiscuously over the emotional landscape.

Even beyond the mixing palette of our voices, we were immersed in sonic color—the bubbling constant background yellow of pear juice, the iron-gray bumping of our feet on the metal floor, the silver-white squeak of a hand or shoulder rubbing against the moist wall, the smoky sawing of our breathing, every sound amplified by resonance, the strobe constantly changing but also never-ending. It had a numbing quality.

It is what it is. Hemlock was a philosopher. Sometimes his commentary was bitter

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and succinct, and sometimes he opened up with enthusiasm. He seemed to go through cycles, like the rest of us. **Better just take it for what it is.** That was his most bitter refrain, and it ran through all our minds. **Why are we here? What can we do? It is what it is.**

We had no mutual barriers. At first we might have resented physical intrusion, but let a week pass, let a year pass, let moments trickle into moments until the concept of the temporal increment is entirely lost—and psychological barriers dissolve in the luke-warm pear nectar. Taboos fall and liberties become ordinary. Touch replaces vision. We understood each other through touch. The pads of my fingers knew their bodies, at least the upper halves that I could reach as I contorted my arms in the narrow space, my elbows clunking against the walls. He was half a head shorter than me and more thickly built, his hair missing in a circle on top, his cheekbones wide and sturdy, his lips thin, his smile clever, his nose squat, his chest strongly muscled and slightly barreled. He